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## THE RELIGIOUS TRAINING OF CHILDREN BY AGNOSTICS.

THOUGH the title of this paper is pompous its aim is simple. It is an attempt to consider how those who believe in no creed or dogma can help those who are starting life, and for whom they are responsible, in a vital matter of human life, namely, religion.

It may be thought that an Agnostic has no right to make such use of the word religion; that religion—the principle of spiritual life—cannot be dissociated from belief. Certainly the history of religion would include the history of the beliefs of mankind. But, however that may be, in the individual they can be quite distinct: a strong spiritual and religious life can exist with no belief, and a strong belief can exist with a starved and undeveloped spiritual life: and so I use the word religious in speaking of that training, which has to do with what one may call “the habits of the soul.” It is possible to have no view as to whence the soul came and whither it is going, to be able to accept honestly no creed or dogma, to feel the truth of no theory of the universe, and yet to have the strongest instinct that in human life it is the “one thing needful.” The Greeks spoke of it as “that whereby we live,” and it is the Christian religion that has put into words a fundamental principle of human life: “It profiteth a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul.”

To those who look to possess their souls sustained and guided by no conviction of the truth, life is harder and more complicated. I do not wish, even if I could, to apologize for or to justify the position of those who can accept no religious belief. The fact is so. The world has always been inclined to have a good word for those whose conscience would not let them do what they thought to be wrong, but it has always had great difficulty in recognizing the right to exist of those who cannot believe what it holds to be the truth. For this reason it has stained the pages of its history with blood and crime and has multiplied by thousands not only its martyrs but its hypocrites. Now at last the civilized world leaves the unbeliever in peace. Danger to himself and his belongings comes not from it, but from himself. It lies in a certain tendency to torpor of soul—not so much, perhaps, a danger to himself, as to his succeeding generation—because in a bewilderment of responsibility, and a desire to be above all things honest, he may cause them to suffer, as it were a spiritual blight, by cutting them off from the spiritual life and traditions of mankind.

There are two ways in which parents who are unbelievers act. Feeling the intense importance of a faith which shall sustain and guide, and their own inability to teach this, they may abdicate in favor of a teacher who believes. Abdication, more or less complete, in favor of nurses, governesses and schoolmasters is a favorite plan with English parents, pursued often in that blind obedience to custom, which is only another name for laziness; but also heavily supported by all those weighty arguments which show the wisdom of doing as other people do. But here, abdication would be purely conscientious, and it must be complete to be successful, so complete as to be practically impossible. All that moral and spiritual side of the child's life which is not merely a dim background to every day existence, but which is constantly made prominent by all the problems of life even by the elementary ones of the nursery and the schoolroom, must be absolutely closed to the parent. The fact that their parents in whose absolute wisdom they have at an early age a complete and touching

confidence, stand aside and practically say "I cannot talk to you about this: you must believe what so and so says,—though I cannot:" would shake in children the foundations of belief, and start doubt of a most penetrating and disastrous kind. And to bring up your children to consider you as wrong on the most important points of life, which you must do, if you wish them to believe that others are right, is a self-repression so unnatural that it cannot be wholesome.

The second plan pursued seems to me to be the only possible one. It consists in accepting the personal attitude of doubt and unbelief—in trying to make its sincerity and its spirit realizable: but at the same time it considers as an aim, the understanding of what belief and faith are, and the creeds and dogmas that spring from them. It considers as a terrible evil that dreary negative frame of mind which, because it fears its superstitions, cuts itself off from the spiritual life of mankind and would guard a child from hearing the name of God, from taking part in religious service or ritual, because the ideas connected with them have by some minds been abused and degraded into superstition and cant. Although you cannot teach and explain to your children a creed, practically saying "this is what I feel to be the truth, try to understand and believe it as such, let it be your inspiration, your guide, your consolation":—yet you can explain it in a spirit which says "this is what many people believe to be the truth: to them it is sacred: try to understand the power belief has been and can be, how it has had and still has its martyrs and its heroes; and while your whole soul may go out to what they have done and suffered and hoped, never for a moment think that your admiration and reverence for them obliges you to believe what they believe. But a world is shut to you if you do not make the effort to understand and feel the beliefs of mankind. Without any effort a few years of life will make you understand the intolerance, the prejudice, the hypocrisy, the superstition of men, but unless you have insight into what lies behind,—into their higher spiritual life often so repellant and distorted on the surface—the best part of life is closed to you. It would be better not to have lived than to go through the world never

penetrating below its crust, with eyes fixed on its dreariness and superstition and mistakes."

In the first stage of training, I should think that the same plan would be followed both by the orthodox and by unbelievers. The morality of little children is determined for them, by the authority of the people who surround them, and who have the care of them: and its inspiration is the faith, love and admiration that these beings inspire. All questions of conduct, honor, self-control, justice, the claims of others and the consideration due to them—the latter points very dim and difficult at this early age to children, who have no very clear sense of anybody with rights and claims being in the world beside themselves,—are determined for them not so much by the conscious teaching and exhortations as by the unconscious life and actions of these people. In them the morality, the spiritual life of the whole world is summed up for the child, and their influence for good or evil depends not on what they consciously say or teach, but on the quality of their natures, the atmosphere of their souls, for which we have but the lame word personality. Thus it is the selection of those whom we place near our children that is all-important in early years.

I should have thought it impossible for small immature minds to take in the great ideas of religion. All great ideas require for their understanding a certain mental power of generalization, and a certain emotional experience, which is beyond the range of small children. The stories and incidents which occur in the course of orthodox religious training, perhaps illustrate this point best. The piquancy of these stories partly arises from their tendency to border on the profane, but they possess another kind of interest as showing the absolute failure to make very young children realize the great ideas of religion. It is the desperate endeavor to realize abstract ideas such as the nature of God, the power of faith and prayer, that gives rise to these stories: children try to understand by promptly bringing these ideas within the range of their experience and emotions, and the result is something very like profanity. But they themselves are neither irreverent nor profane. The child who in the endeavor to make real to itself the idea of

God, questions as to the arrangement of that part of life which is most important to itself, viz., meals, and on receiving the answer *no* to its questions, has God any breakfast? has God any dinner? comes triumphantly to the conclusion that he must have an egg for his tea,—the child who will have it, that because angels have wings, they must also have beaks—the child who wishing to test the efficacy of prayer and faith prays for eyes at the back of his head, and states that he cannot wait any longer than ten days—have no profanity or irreverence in their souls, they are only desperately endeavoring to realize ideas that they see their elders think very important, and to do so, they must reduce them to the measure of their lives and experience. The child who was taken to see Doré's picture of the Christian martyrs in the Coliseum and came back full of pity for the poor lion who had no Christian, was simply true to his own instincts and limited sympathy. Being a healthy little animal, he had naturally small sympathy with martyrdom which he could not understand, and great sympathy with an animal having no fun, which he could perfectly understand. As a rule children become silent on these subjects, when they find that their attempts to realize them in their own way or to give any solution to the problem of the universe according to their lights, are received with embarrassment and answered without common sense.

I was much interested in the experiences of the wife of Charles Lloyd, the friend of Charles Lamb, who records in a diary the questions of her children, whom she instructed on religious subjects and “encouraged not *taught* to think.” The questions are what one would expect from intelligent children at ease with their teacher, but not yet old enough to realize impersonal ideas. Mrs. Lloyd herself finds in them an illustration of how the constant necessity of explanation “by the analogies of ordinary and infinitely inferior concerns keeps in the minds of children a constant idea of the comparative dignity of the Deity and His operations;” but impartial onlookers will, I think, rather feel that the necessities of the children's minds pulled down dangerously low the Deity and his operations and will wonder what mental elevation could possibly result.

"How tired God must be after making all things. Could God kill himself and how would he do it if he wanted to? What shape is he?—if he is everywhere he must be all shapes. Now suppose I dig a round hole, if God is there, he must be round, and if there was a very long place, and he was all about there, then he must be long. I cannot think how it is." I think questions of this sort show, however a fond mother may interpret them, that the teaching has simply failed. But Mrs. Lloyd recalls one question of her little boy's, which hints at a real danger in beginning too early to make children think on certain subjects. If they are encouraged to ponder on the great problems of religion they naturally try to settle them according to their little ideas of justice, of honor and of kindness; and the bewilderment that ensues either lands them in apathy and indifference, or encourages a critical and bitter spirit, which is fatal to the growth of the soul, when it comes before the power to understand and imagine. "Mamma, would it not be as easy for God to stop us before we do wrong things, as to punish us for them afterwards?" "If we were very wicked in this world, would God make us suffer more than Jesus did when he was crucified?" These are but the very early and crude workings of that perplexity and wonder, which might develop in the soul a bitterness fatal to some temperaments. No teacher would wish to start enquiries of this nature. They show a connection which no orthodox parent would welcome between the early workings of their child's mind and that of the Persian poet eight hundred years ago.

"O Thou, Who man of baser earth didst make,  
And even with Paradise devise the Snake:  
For all the sin wherewith the face of man  
Is blackened—Man's forgiveness give—and take."

I do not mean to say that some dim foreshadowing of the great ideas of the spiritual world—some understanding of the greatness of things outside their own lives and experiences could not be given to quite small children: but this must be according as these ideas are reflected in the minds of those who have the care of them, and this communication is unconscious and not necessarily connected with what they con-

sciously teach. For instance, the story of the life of Christ taught by a nurse or governess or parent who is by nature selfish and intolerant, has no meaning for a child. And those who have lived among savages say that the success of the work of missionaries is determined by their character and personality alone. The realization by the uncivilized of the great ideas of Christianity, their progress in honor, justice and self-control depend not at all on the doctrines they learn, for these they could turn and twist and lower to fit their savage instincts, but on the unconscious influence of the character and personality of the men who work among them.

The second stage would begin when children are old enough to enter into the spirit of thoughts and feelings which have no direct and obvious connection with their actual daily lives: when their imagination is sufficiently mature to go out to meet ideas, instead of dragging them down to the level of their limited experience. How soon one stage succeeds another must be a matter of temperament, though it is probable that all normal minds go through the same phases of development about the same time. In any case it is most important not to anticipate the capacity for understanding impersonal ideas. Most of us probably know what it is to go through a greater part of life with a distasteful or a dreary atmosphere hanging round certain ideas with which our minds have been battered in youth, and which have appeared to us grotesque or unpleasant or merely trivial according to the tone of our mind.

In anticipating in children the growth of imagination by insisting that they should think about things that they cannot possibly understand, you harden and stultify their souls and profane and desecrate the ideas. For instance, to put too early before a childish mind, great ideas like those of the Atonement, the Incarnation, the Trinity, which it seems to me require a high poetic and imaginative faculty for their full understanding, degrades both the mind and the idea and is a fruitful source in after years of profanity and indifference.

But when a child is able to understand impersonal ideas, it is most important that it should be encouraged to understand the great simple ideas common to most religions, the ideas of God,



of worship, of prayer, of faith. Most people are connected, either by bringing up or through family or friends, with some church or sect with the beliefs and observances of which they are more or less familiar. It is to these beliefs and observances they must turn as those which they are best fitted to explain with understanding and above all sympathy. If they themselves happen to have thrown them off with defiance and repulsion, if they have suffered from the presence of a creed forced on them from outside which has roused no response in their souls, they must forget that at one time circumstances perhaps caused them to passionately dwell on its shortcomings, its superstition, its insufficiency. But when the spirit of rebellion and defiance is laid to rest, their lives must have been very narrow and empty of opportunity, if they have had no chance of realizing what it meant of beauty and truth to others. The first duty to children is in all things to show the great and beautiful side, not to narrow down and belittle the world by dwelling on its inconsistencies, its superstitions, its hypocrisies. If an idea to you has neither truth or beauty, you must seek its interpretation through the medium of a soul you love and understand.

It is perhaps through the human element that children will first come to realize the nature of religious ideas. It is the human element in the story of Christ that has first touched many souls into the understanding of what Christianity means. The cry on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," has done more than many sermons on the Atonement, to bring home to little minds the idea of Christ as Mediator and Saviour. And faith and prayer can never be mere names to a child who has felt a glow over the story of Joan of Arc, a peasant girl who was happy in a simple life of humble tasks, but who led armies and reversed the fate of nations, and met disgrace, contempt, and a cruel death, through the strength of the inward vision—the sustaining force of prayer and faith. To read the story of Father Damian and his life on the leper-island is to realize the nature of the renunciation and self-sacrifice that Christianity teaches. All through life it is the capacity for hero-worship that makes the difficult

morality of life easy. It is, in itself, a great power: for it is not only pity and terror that purify the soul, but the glow of admiration and of love that banishes all lower feelings, before a worshipped person or deed. And it is only in quite the early stages of development that hero-worship means actual imitation of the hero. For instance, the thought of Nelson has been known to nerve a boy for the torments of the dentist's chair: in which one would imagine there was small scope for direct imitation.

The third stage, which can be said to last throughout life, begins when a child is old enough to understand that there is more than one ideal in life,—that man's highest life has been, and is, inspired by widely differing beliefs,—and that our spiritual life is a combination of many ideals, thoughts, feelings: that out of these countless number of "voices in the world all of them significant," each soul has to make its own harmony. And in this stage as in every other, it is of the utmost importance to approach every phase of thought from its best and most beautiful side. As a rule the fact that there are different ideals in the world is revealed to the young chiefly through the sense of their "blows, clashing and entanglements"—in the moral problems that beset them even in the nursery,—in the clashing of impulses, in the problem of duty and happiness. At some period of life these things must puzzle the young, more or less of course according to their temperaments and circumstances. Girls are left to themselves, and each harmonizes in her own way the ideal of the nursery and the schoolroom—that to be good is the most important thing in life,—with her personal experiences of social life and the ballroom.

But with boys, the plan seems to have been to puzzle them systematically, quite early in life, by confronting them with the two great conflicting spiritual ideals of the world. At a comparatively early age boys were, as a rule, and still are to a certain extent, plunged into a course of strictly classical education. This, if it has any result at all must familiarize them with the Greek and pagan view of life, and one would imagine, would cause a certain bewilderment in a small mind that is being trained in religious matters on orthodox Christian lines.

And the curious thing is, that it is the pagan view of life that is taught to them most attractively, through the means of the most beautiful literature in the world, and the Christian view of life, much less attractive naturally to the young, is taught didactically as truth, by dogma, doctrine, sermons, compulsory chapel, etc. I am told, however, that the ordinary school-boy never attains to that advanced mental condition when he realizes anything enough to be consciously bewildered: yet I cannot help thinking that the very fact of being let loose thus early among conflicting ideals of life, if it does not produce conscious perplexity, does seriously conduce to that torpor in the higher regions of thought, frequently observed in the normal English boy after passing through the mental discipline of a sound classical education. To insist that they shall always be concerned with ideas that they cannot or do not want to understand; and that appear not only to have no connection with each other but to have no connection with life as they understand it, is a fruitful source of the disposition to view all things, "in disconnection dull and spiritless." In any case this torpor is fatal to spiritual development of any kind on orthodox lines, or otherwise.

In this, the third stage, when it has dawned upon a child that there is more than one ideal of truth and morality in the world, the path of the orthodox and agnostic distinctly diverges. The aim of the orthodox is to concentrate the soul on one faith, one belief as absolutely true: whatever knowledge and insight into other faiths may come to it by the way, is partial and relative. The aim of the agnostic on the contrary is to acquire as much understanding as possible of the faiths, beliefs, ideals that sway mankind and have swayed them in the past.

And here we must leave them, or rather they have arrived at the same stage in which we are: and we can do no more for them. Life must do the rest. Training of any kind can only sharpen certain perceptions and help to give a point of view. But to start life with a sensitive soul, quick to understand and to feel generously and justly, is no small thing. The soul that

can deal thus with the facts of life and of knowledge will climb more than a little way to the "vantage ground of truth."

This then, roughly indicated, is the religious training an agnostic can give. And as in all training the aim is to give a habit of the mind, so in this training, the aim is to give a habit of the soul. And this habit of the soul consists in a sort of justice in fixing on what is beautiful and noble in the beliefs and opinions and motives of men; instead of staying on the surface and dwelling on the inconsistency, the intolerance, the cruelty, the sordidness and the triviality that crush and hide them: and in cultivating this habit, the soul grows through contemplation of what is great and beautiful in life; and its enthusiasm for this is its inspiration.

But such a training will not make life simple. As it cannot teach that truth is found in any one belief, or right in any one line of action: but teaches that truth and right are found in infinite varieties and infinite disguises: so it increases, as it were, the complications of life and its responsibilities. It can give no theory that will beforehand settle the problems that in life come crowding one after the other; it teaches that each one as it arises must be decided afresh; and that these decisions which make the moral life of man, depend on the breadth and depth of his spiritual life, on the vigor and vitality, the true perceptions of his soul—that "one thing needful,"—"that whereby we live."

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